

Victorian theatre and poetry

The Victorian theatre

The genre

The dominant literary form in the Victorian age was the novel, while drama had long lost its central position. After the great season in the Elizabethan and Jacobean times and a revival in the mid-17th century, no great author had written any plays of interest in Britain. The decline of drama in the 19th century is mainly due to the great power of theatre managers who decided which plays to stage according to their financial return.

Moreover, the presence of great actors decided the success of the plays, regardless of their content.

In short, in the 19th century there were two main types of theatre:

- the 'official' theatre, with genres that are legally staged only in the patent houses, i.e. theatres having the monopoly on legitimate drama;
- 'popular' genres like melodrama, farce and pantomime, performed in minor theatres that developed in working-class areas. Songs and music were widely employed along with fights and stage tricks.

Melodrama, in particular, was characterised by a very clear distinction between good and evil, while the protagonists were working-class types.

Many comedies performed in 19th-century London theatres were sugar-coated society at all levels. The main issues dealt with are marriage, family and children, the wife/husband relationship and divorce. With the regulation act of 1843 minor theatres too could produce 'legitimate' dramas.

The demand for new plays was enormous. In the early 19th century there were mainly translations of French comedies characterised by pure entertainment. Later on the influence of Anton Chekhov and August Strindberg supplied a deeper psychological insight into the characters, while Henrik Ibsen brought a socially committed type of theatre.

The playhouses

Throughout the 19th century theatres maintained the basic rectangular shape with a pit for the orchestra and seating on the main floor or 'grand salon' with an aisle down the centre, tiers of side boxes and a gallery above. After the mid-1820s, the depth of the forestage was decreased in favour of additional seating. A major change is also given by the boxes around the pit with orchestra seating. Scenic accuracy increased since reality was depicted as faithfully as possible. Stage lighting was also used to increase the impression of authenticity.

Poetry in the Victorian Age

Poetry in the Victorian age stems from the Romantic investigations in the ideal, transcendental world as opposed to reality. Yet, the Victorian mood turns into doubt and anxiety as poetry looks for certainties – often religious ones – that the transcendent is reality. Unfortunately, the materialistic world can no longer satisfy the poet, who ponders on the crisis of the age with sadness and anguish. Victorian poets are in fact torn between a decorative style – to improve the content – and

an escapist trend – to reject reality, as Tennyson and Arnold. Others, like Hopkins, resort to faith and accept the mystery behind existence. Unlike the previous ones, other poets seem to accept the material world and depict the outer conditions in the ‘poetic novels’, basically narrative poems, full of accurate observations on worldly issues (Browning, *Aurora Leigh*). Innovative poems are ‘dramatic monologues’, that often give voice to altered characters, in a serious attempt to investigate the inner processes of the mind. All through the period, escapist poetry tries to offer alternative, idealised, self-contained forms. The Pre-Raphaelites love the medieval as an ideal dimension and the Decadents, after them, create a world of pleasure and refinement against materialism and utilitarianism.

Main Victorian poets

Alfred Tennyson (1809-1892)

A rector’s son who started writing poetry at an early age and composed his most famous collection of poems after the death of his best friend A.H. Hallam in 1833. In 1850 he published it under the title *In Memoriam*, became Poet Laureate, and married his long-time fiancée.

Robert Browning (1812-1889)

He was not greatly appreciated in his lifetime. He is famous for the ‘dramatic monologue’ form in which the narrator invades the lyric. He secretly married the poetess Elizabeth Barrett and ran off with her in 1846 to Florence, Italy, where they lived happily for 15 years.

The Ring and the Book (1869) was written after her death and deals with an Italian crime story told through a series of dramatic monologues.

Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-1892)

He was one of the founders of the Pre-Raphaelite group of painters, along with William Holman Hunt and John Millais.

Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1889)

A young Anglican, turned Catholic at Oxford in 1866. His poems were published posthumously in 1918 by his poet friend Robert Bridges and are very innovative in form.